



**CENTRE AFRICAIN D'ÉTUDES ET DE
RECHERCHE SUR LE TERRORISME
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**AFRICAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY AND
RESEARCH ON TERRORISM (ACSRT)**



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DIALOGUE AS A CARDINAL TOOL FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

BRIEFING PAPER

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Editor's note

On behalf of the ACSRT of the African Union and the PHRD of Switzerland, the undersigned would like to express their sincere gratitude to Professor Adder Abel Gwoda of the University of Maroua, Cameroon, who provided his unique expertise in the preparation of this Briefing Paper.

However, they remain solely responsible for any shortcomings that may be identified.

Any questions on this Briefing Paper should be directed to the editors:

- Col. Christian Emmanuel MOUAYA POUYI, Head of Training, ACSRT/AU (pouyim@africa-union.org / mouayapouyi2003@yahoo.fr)
- Mrs Carol MOTTET, Senior Adviser, Peace and Human Rights Division, Swiss FDFA (carol.mottet@eda.admin.ch)

Introduction

According to the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE)¹, prevention must be comprehensive, multisectoral and multi-stakeholder. This highlights the need to bring together several sectors of society for a common goal: that the occurrence of violent extremism (VE) does not happen. Indeed, we are beginning to better understand and accept that the blanket security response has its limits, because it does not take into account the root causes, both endogenous and exogenous, that breed and fuel violence. VE is complex; it requires a common understanding of the phenomenon and specific, innovative, appropriate and tailored responses.

Based on the UN Action Plan for PVE, Switzerland launched a PVE programme in 2016 that drives a regional initiative for PVE in Africa.² This series of regional seminars, which brings together political decision-makers, representatives of the defence and security forces, national or local elected representatives, civil administrators, members of civil society, religious and traditional authorities, representatives of the media, the private sector, etc., aims to share experiences and ideas in order to better understand the factors and dynamics that fuel violent extremism (VE) on the continent, but above all, to mobilize responses that address its causes. This initiative, which now includes some forty meetings, has resulted in one central recommendation: **the need for dialogue**.

The establishment of a permanent, coherent and sincere dialogue between different players regarding the ways of achieving a lasting solution to a crisis is in harmony with the values upheld by the United Nations Charter, the **United Nations Action Plan for the PVE which recognizes "Dialogue and Conflict Prevention" as the first area of concrete measures to be invested in the PVE**³, as well as the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which in its statement of measures to eliminate conditions conducive to the spread of VE, expressly recommends initiatives and programmes that promote dialogue.⁴ **Dialogue is therefore the cornerstone of the PVE**. It is a vital tool because of its ability to serve as a bridge in situations of tension or a breakdown in the relationship between various stakeholders in a society, its ability to positively transform a deteriorated environment and, above all, its ability to engage the various stakeholders, regardless of their responsibilities, in a collective search for a solution to violence and its causes, without resorting to antagonistic bidding.

It is with this in mind that the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) of the African Union and the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) launched a joint PVE training programme for African Union Member States in 2020.⁵ Not surprisingly, dialogue is the driving force behind this programme.

They also wanted to make available **this Briefing Paper on "Dialogue as a cardinal tool for violence prevention"**, which is part of a series of didactic documents whose sole purpose is to clarify and

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism, Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674, 24 December 2015 <https://undocs.org/en/A/70/674>

² See amongst other the reports of the three main meetings: Algiers, June 2018 https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/1809_Algers-Meeting-Note-English.pdf; N'Djamena, June 2017 <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/IPI-E-RPT-Chad-Meeting-Note-English.pdf>; Dakar, June 2016 https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/1609_Investing-in-Peace-ENGLISH.pdf

³ United Nations Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism, op. cit., paragraph 49.

⁴ United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted on 8 September 2006 (Res. 60/288). <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/504/88/PDF/N0550488.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ See notably the report of the 2019 Regional PVE Course for Central Africa (Yaounde): https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39274-doc-summary_report_1.pdf; the report of the 2022 PVE Regional Course for Central Africa (Libreville): https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/42136-doc-Cours_regional_PEV_CEEAC_28-31.03.2022_Rapport_synthese_v.2022_04_25_FINAL_E-1.pdf; the report of the 2022 PVE Regional Course for West Africa (Accra): https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/42278-doc-Cours_regional_PEV_AO_Accra_4-7.07.2022_Rapport_synthese_v.2022_10_04_E_1.pdf

stimulate various aspects of violence prevention work, to all those who hope to consolidate their commitment in this area.

This Briefing Paper first outlines the generalities of the PVE and then develops the fundamental role of dialogue, its strength, its scope and the options open to it as well as the commitment it requires, together with some practical illustrations.

I. PVE emergence

The United Nations Secretary-General noted in 2015 that VE "undermines peace and security, the enjoyment of human rights and development, and no country or region is immune to its effects."⁶ Indeed, the past three decades have seen the emergence of so-called violent extremist groups on the African continent as well as in other parts of the world. Social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental factors account for the emergence and subsequent violent actions of these groups, which have spread geographically and become entrenched in the population. Moreover, VE no longer only takes the form of terrorist attacks, but also complex armed conflicts that cause significant casualties among the population. This is why it is imperative to adopt strategies to prevent this violence, through systematic measures that address its root causes. This is how the term prevention of violent extremism (PVE) came about.

The key idea behind the PVE is that we must not only use military means to combat VE, but also address its structural causes, which are pull and push factors. These factors, or causes, may include, but are not limited to, intolerance, governance problems, political exclusion, racism, corruption, injustice and impunity (and the desire for revenge that they provoke), abuse and violence by state officials and in particular by the defence and security forces, the search for protection, poverty, unemployment (especially among young people), marginalization and feelings of exclusion, identity crises, violent regime change and the resurgence of old, poorly resolved conflicts.⁷

Therefore, a PVE action must necessarily take into account the causes and not merely the symptoms of the crisis. In its preparation, implementation and evaluation, it is necessary to take into consideration the contributions of all local, national, regional and international players who can be instrumental in achieving the objectives, regardless of which side of violence they are located. In addition, it is about mobilizing a multitude of action areas whose inputs can lead to peace. **Dialogue is the common denominator for all these players and sectors.**

II. Essence, objectives and forms of dialogue

1. Essence of dialogue

The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek words "dia" and "logos", meaning "between" and "speech" respectively. According to the classical definition of the word, dialogue is a verbal communication between at least two people. It is therefore a framework of discourse, talk and conversation, which from the outset implies the notion of an encounter. We cannot talk or converse alone, we need another person for this to happen. In this regard, dialogue is a mode of communication and an essential tool for conflict prevention and resolution. It invites people with varied experiences and often divergent points of view to engage in a frank and open conversation with the explicit objective of reaching a mutual understanding and finding a common solution to a problem that could harm, or is already harming, everyone. This is what the African palaver does so well.

⁶ United Nations Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism, op. cit.

⁷ See notably: International Peace Institute (IPI), *Why preventing violent extremism needs sustaining peace*, October 2017, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1707_Preventing-Violent-Extremism.pdf

Dialogue is therefore different from debate, mediation, conciliation or facilitation. The purpose of debate is to get one party to adopt the point of view or conviction of another party or group. Mediation is a voluntary process aimed at clarifying difficulties and seeking negotiated solutions to a conflict, and is based on the intervention of a third party explicitly requested by the parties to the conflict. This is also the case of conciliation, but in that case the role of the third party is not predominant. Facilitation, which also involves a third party (or a *primus inter pares*), consists of creating conditions and a space

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Dialogue is in essence a social regulator.

conducive to the conduct of a dialogue. **The aim of dialogue is not to get all parties to agree or to negotiate, but rather to broaden participants' individual and collective understanding of divisive issues and to give them the opportunity to evolve their positions by listening to each other, for the**

essence of dialogue is to be transformative. Dialogue provides a mechanism for participants to disagree while giving them the freedom to seek ways to act for a better future for all. **Dialogue is in essence a social regulator.**

Therefore, dialogue is a key component of the PVE, as it is a bearer of virtues, and its mobilization leads to communion, inclusion, unity and cohesion of the stakeholders around a common goal, which is to maintain or seek appeasement. Dialogue is therefore the royal road to the prevention and transformation of conflict.

2. Objectives of dialogue

Conflicts between people and societies are as old as the world itself. They are inherent to human nature, because they are the fruit of freedom of thought and the differences that exist between individuals. They are to be considered as a warning, which alerts us when something is not working properly within society. However, preventing these conflicts from degenerating into violence, or seeking to resolve

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them if they have already broken out, inevitably calls for interdependence between the protagonists. Since one cannot dialogue alone, the main objective of dialogue will be to bring together the key players in a social tension or violent conflict, to rebuild shared trust between them and encourage the building of a consensus necessary to implement conflict prevention or resolution strategies that are acceptable to all.

The **structures and processes of meaningful dialogue can transform hostile relationships** by fostering interaction and communication, thereby building trust and creating opportunities for conflict prevention or sustainable conflict resolution. Dialogue can, for example, ease the situation and open the way for less tense negotiations between the protagonists in an armed conflict; but it can also play a role in regulating the socio-political tensions that arise from disagreements within a society, thus playing a preventive role.

3. Forms, spaces and times of dialogue

Dialogue involves all kinds of discussions, consultations or even mere exchanges of information between participants on issues of common interest regarding the source of social tensions or violent conflict. Dialogue can then take several **forms**:

- *Dialogue is institutional and formal*, when it is established in a formal or legal manner and uses the formal canons of interaction characterized by direct discussions as well as a formal commitment to the long-term establishment of an active and concrete link between stakeholders in order to find common solutions to identified problems.

- *Dialogue is institutional and informal* when it is formally established and brings together participants to informally address issues of common concern, without necessarily committing to common solutions in the process.
- *Dialogue is non-institutional and informal*, when stakeholders understand the need for dialogue as a means of preventing or resolving conflict and accept initiatives for discussion without a formal or institutional framework.

This shows that, depending on the form of the dialogue, its concrete and specific objectives may vary; it also shows that dialogue, however useful and important it may be, may not be sufficient in itself to prevent or resolve a problem; it may simply help to initiate the relationship and soften viewpoints, but at that juncture another mechanism may be necessary (for example, negotiation and mediation).

Whatever the form of the dialogue, it unfolds according to the form of **consultation** or **concertation**. Consultation aims to gather or exchange information, points of view or positions on the disputed issue. As for concertation, it can be defined as a contradictory debate between the parties on a subject or a situation, which is a source of conflict, with a view to understanding and exchanging points of view or the positions of each party. Concertation has the advantage over consultation in that it takes place with the purpose of bringing points of view closer together, or of facilitating the acceptance of their diversity, while promoting the common recognition of the importance of preserving or restoring peace.

It should also be noted that the **spaces** in which different stakeholders dialogue can vary greatly. They can range from dialogue frameworks set up at the national level to dialogue spaces at the local level, or even radio dialogue spaces. They can be *ad hoc* or permanent. They all have their own values, and they all, in their multiplicity, also contribute peace dialogue in a broader sense.

It is wise to approach the dialogue as a process that will take time, and that will be built up gradually.

Finally, the **time** allocated for dialogue is a key element of success: building trust, building relationships, building understanding of the issues, building stakeholder buy-in, ensuring a unifying and inclusive

effort, working with both political elites and grassroots communities, all take time. That is why it is wise to approach dialogue as a **process** that will take time, and that will be built up gradually. In fact, as a social regulator and a means of preventing violence in a society, dialogue is more than a temporary tool: it should be a **pivotal instrument of public governance**.

III. Dialogue stakeholders and mechanisms, and context specificity

1. PVE dialogue stakeholders and multi-stakeholder dialogue

Since the transformation of hostile relations into relationships of trust is built through dialogue, the interactions must include a great number of stakeholders who at each level of the process will make it possible to find holistic and sustainable responses in conflict prevention or resolution. In this regard, the PVE must adopt a **multi-stakeholder approach** in order to establish or build a common understanding between the stakeholders within a society, through a synergy of actions based on the various responsibilities of each player involved.

These players include, but are not limited to, political decision-makers, defence and security forces, national and local elected representatives, central and local government officials, grassroots populations and communities, religious and community leaders, civil society organizations, researchers, media professionals, and regional and international organizations.

Depending on these different stakeholders in the peacebuilding area, it is possible to hold **dialogues with different types of players**: civil-military dialogues, intercultural dialogues, intergenerational dialogues, dialogues between extremist groups and institutional actors, between confessional groups and political actors, between socio-professional groups and political actors, between the army and

political actors, inter- and intra- confessional dialogues, between grassroots communities and local or national authorities, etc.

2. Mechanics of dialogue: direct or facilitated dialogue

Dialogue requires both a willingness on the part of the various protagonists and a mastery of the mechanics of conciliation. Dialogue can be conducted **directly between the stakeholders** who wish to engage in it. However, experience has shown that there are obstacles that can make direct dialogue difficult or unsuccessful. Some stakeholders, for example, may be suspicious of dialogue proposals. Or reluctant to listen to each other. Or they may be poorly informed about each other's expectations. Or there is a lack of neutral ground (physical spaces, but also relational spaces), etc.

In such cases, the **facilitation of dialogue**, or even the mediation of a transaction, can be considered and their first contribution consists in providing reassurance of the mutual goodwill to dialogue and to discuss. They are seen as ways for a third party to support interactions between parties in disagreement or violent conflict.

3. Need for context-specific dialogue

The complexity and multi-faceted nature of extremist violence highlights the need for prevention stakeholders to pool their efforts to find ways of transforming the crisis through tailored approaches. Each crisis is unique and the ways of prevention or resolution must be contextualized.

Non-violent approaches that address the causes of violence, through dialogue between the different stakeholders, seem to be more accepted and understood today. A typical example of this is the role of the defence and security forces: while they are mandated to implement the military and security response decided by political leaders, they are often held responsible for the stalemate in the crisis because of the many human rights abuses that their members may commit; it should therefore be emphatically noted that any process of conflict prevention and transformation cannot take place without their involvement. Another example is the fact that political decision-makers are key players

In summary, the permanent transformation of the conflict or its causes, as well as the efforts of the various actors involved, demand that engagement in dialogue be constant and not circumstantial, and be inclusive rather than one-sided. The key is the constant adaptation of dialogue to the context and the stakeholders.

as they have the power to take the decision that will stop the crisis. However, their decision can only be successful if the beneficiaries of the decision have participated in different phases of the decision-making process. The dialogue is thus modulated in terms of the stakeholders needed for the prevention or sustainable resolution of the crisis.

In summary, the permanent transformation of the conflict or its causes, as well as the efforts of the various actors involved, demand that engagement in dialogue be constant and not circumstantial, and be inclusive rather than one-sided. The key is the constant adaptation of dialogue to the context and the stakeholders.

IV. Conditions and best practices for PVE dialogue

1. Conditions necessary for PVE dialogue

It should be noted that the start of an escalation of violence does not preclude dialogue for PVE, just as is the case in conventional conflict resolution. Even in times of violence, it is possible and even necessary to work on the root causes that give rise to it. Initiating dialogue is first of all about having a peaceful state of mind, but it is also about creating the different conditions necessary for an inclusive and holistic dialogue, such as:

- ensuring **prior acceptance** of the idea of dialogue and openness to discuss all issues without prejudice;

- conducting a needs assessment and **conflict or tension analysis** to understand the players, structures, objectives, dynamics of violence, causes and consequences of the conflict or tension, before building a dialogue platform, in order to make it as inclusive and appropriate as possible (choice of participants, objectives and process of dialogue, etc.);
- **focusing** the dialogue on building an inclusive consensus on **how to address the causes of VE**;
- using, if necessary, a **facilitator** recognized for their ability to ensure that common interests prevail;
- providing **spaces** for dialogue (physical and relational) that foster trust and respect;
- building **equity** into platforms for exchange and dialogue, so that they pave the way for consensus building that takes into account the contributions of all on an equal footing;
- ensuring that the inclusion of stakeholders in dialogue is **consistent with the context, purpose and objective of the dialogue**;
- ensuring the inclusion of **marginal**, vulnerable and minority **stakeholders**, women, young people, the elderly, people living with disabilities, victims, including their participation in decision-making in the dialogue process;
- accepting that dialogue can also take place with **perpetrators of violence** (armed groups, militias);
- placing **good faith**, sincere commitment of the participants, openness and empathetic listening at the heart of the dialogue, which are key to its success;
- giving priority to **common interest**, which should prevail over partisan considerations (overt or covert) or rigid positions;
- broadening the dialogue to include **neighbouring or regional players** if the causes of the crisis transcend national borders.

2. Best practices for dialogue

Engaging in PVE dialogue means proactively putting in place mechanisms that block the dynamics of conflict and prevent the occurrence or escalation of violence. Experiences in different conflict theatres have documented several best practices that can contribute to strengthening the fundamental role of dialogue in the PVE. These include:

- adopting and implementing **legislative and policy frameworks** at national, regional and international levels, together with **programmes of action**, to strengthen dialogue between different social actors threatened or confronted with VE; ensuring that they are developed and implemented in a participatory manner;
- establishing joint **early warning and rapid response mechanisms** at different scales on VE threats and risks; take into account existing mechanisms at regional level (e.g. regional economic commissions);
- adopting a **multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary and inclusive** approach in all PVE steps and processes;
- taking into account the **role, contribution and responsibility of each player** at local, national, regional and international level in joint PVE initiatives;
- promoting **synergies between defence and security forces and communities**, through an inclusive, frank and permanent dialogue, in order to foster trust and a better understanding of respective roles and responsibilities in the PVE;
- ensuring that the various approaches directly address the **causes of violence** but also take into account the situation of **victims** of violent extremism;

- engaging in dialogue between policy makers, practitioners and communities on **the land governance issues** that are often the root causes of violence.
- **engaging resolutely in dialogue at an early stage**, as the longer stakeholders delay the dialogue, the more deep rooted VE becomes; and acknowledging that while dialogue must address the causes of violence, **it needs time** and must not be sacrificed to short-term options;
- promoting both **traditional and modern dispute resolution mechanisms** with dialogue as a fundamental approach. Many poorly resolved conflicts have triggered or accelerated many of today's VE crises;
- adopting **pedagogical approaches** (e.g. training) to better educate and sensitize stakeholders to the strengths and virtues of dialogue;
- necessarily strengthening the **common and universal values** to lead stakeholders towards the common goal;
- developing a **common monitoring and evaluation framework** with stakeholders that promotes transparency and allows for a better understanding of the impact of measures taken after a dialogue process to avoid recurrence and to ensure that efforts are well directed.

Conclusion

For several years now, Africa has been plagued by both intra-state and transnational violence and conflict, caused by perpetrators belonging to so-called violent extremist armed groups, community militias, bandits or traffickers who also resort to violence, armed forces empowered by the legal violence of States, as well as partners providing assistance in military and security cooperation. This violence, which is often intertwined, most often pits State actors against armed non-state actors, within the same State. This violence seriously affects civilian populations, who are sometimes the direct targets of the violence, thus undermining all chances of development on the continent. Despite the military responses to this violence, the situation seems to be spreading to all parts of the continent. Alternatives to the responses that have been proposed to date must therefore be found.

The alternative response is to open up spaces for conflict transformation and to take action on the root causes of violence in order to prevent them from occurring. For prevention to happen, **efforts must be pooled through the establishment of dialogue** between different stakeholders within societies, based on participatory, inclusive and accountability principles that foster peace-building and development.

Dialogue can become the ultimate tool for governance between all components of society, and it is important for all stakeholders to be involved, according to their roles and responsibilities: it is together that the future of peace is built. This also includes armed non-state actors: since they are an essential component of the conflict, it is vital to engage with them as well to avoid the perpetuation of the conflict. Dialogue is thus the cornerstone of violence prevention.

Annex – About the partners

The African Union, its reference framework and the ACSRT

The African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) was set up, as a structure of the African Union Commission, in accordance with the provisions set out in section H, paragraphs 19 to 21 of the AU Plan of Action for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa (2002). Upon its establishment, the objectives were to assist African countries in building and strengthening their capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, to act as a watchdog and warning tool, and to complement international action by strengthening cooperation among African countries in these areas. Subsequent decisions by AU political bodies expanded this mandate to include the prevention and fight against violent extremism.

The AU Commission, through the ACSRT, strives to:

- build the capacity of States to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism, (strategies and action plans, training, advice...);
- promote better institutional interaction and coordination at the national and regional levels and better development of the Early Warning Mechanism;
- work towards improving the political and legal framework for the prevention and fight against terrorism and violent extremism;
- conduct and promote research on terrorism and violent extremism issues.

By promoting a multidimensional approach, based on the concept of "Human Security" to eradicate VE and terrorism in the Member States of the African Union, this joint PVE training programme is consistent with the mandate of the ACSRT.

The Swiss FDFA's PVE programme

Following the adoption of the United Nations Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (2016), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) made this topic a priority (*). The Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD) is the FDFA's centre of competence that implements its priorities in the areas of peace and human security.

It launched a PVE programme as early as 2016, which has since undertaken a range of advocacy, dialogue and training activities in support of this prevention approach that focuses on the causes of violence and the alternatives that can be provided. It also mobilizes its experts to carry out activities with its partners in the field.

This initiative has held some forty meetings, which have brought together some 2000 people from various professional backgrounds in North, West and Central Africa.

The objective is to provide an informal platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue on the prevention approach, to highlight and strengthen positive initiatives that offer concrete alternatives to VE, and to help build the capacities of PVE stakeholders in their jobs and in their communities.

The African Union's ACSRT and Switzerland's FDFA are partners in this PVE training programme.

(* The Swiss FDFA adopted a Foreign Policy Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in April 2016 – <http://www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/43587.pdf>)

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